Castro Death Plot

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By JACK ANDERSON

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WASHINGTON — Locked in the darkest recesses of the Central Intelligence Agency is the story of six assassination attempts against Cuba's Fidel Castro.

For 10 years, only a few key people have known the terrible secret. They have sworn never to talk. Yet we have learned the details from sources whose credentials are beyond question.

The plot to knock off Castro began as part of the Bay of Pigs operation. The intent was to eliminate the Cuban dictator before the motley invaders landed on the island. Their arrival was expected to touch off a general uprising, which the Communist militia would have had more trouble putting down without the charismatic Castro to lead them.

AFTER THE first attempt failed, five more assassination teams were sent to Cuba. The last team reportedly made it to a rooftop within shooting distance of Castro before members were apprehended. This happened around the last of February or first of March, 1963.

Nine months later, President Kennedy was gunned down in Dallas by Lee Harvey Oswald, a fanatic who previously had agitated for Castro in New Orleans and had made a mysterious trip to the Cuban Embassy in Mexico City.

Among those privy to the CIA conspiracy, there still is a nagging suspicion—unsupported by the Warren Commission's findings—that Castro became aware of the U.S. plot upon his life and somehow recruited Oswald to retaliate against President Kennedy.

To set up the Castro assassination, the CIA enlisted Robert Maheu, a former FBI agent with shadowy contacts, who had handled other undercover assignments for the CIA out of his Washington public relations office. He later moved to Las Vegas to head up billionaire Howard Hughes's Nevada operations.

MAHEU RECRUITED John Roselli, a ruggedly handsome gambler with contacts in both the American and Cuban underworlds, to arrange the assassination. The dapper, hawk-faced Roselli, formerly married to movie actress June Lang, was a power in the movie industry until his conviction with racketeer Willie Bioff in a million-dollar Hollywood labor shakedown.

Charged to CIA

The CIA assigned two of its most trusted operatives, William Harvey and James "Big Jim" O'Connell, to the hush-hush murder mission. Using phony names, they accompanied Roselli on trips to Miami to line up the assassination teams.

The full story reads like the script of a James Bond movie, complete with secret trysts at glittering Miami Beach hotels and midnight powerboat dashes to secret landing spots on the Cuban coast. Once, Roselli's boat was shot out from under him.

For the first try, the CIA furnished Roselli with special poison capsules to slip into Castro's food. The poison was supposed to take three days to act. By the time Castro died, his system would throw off all traces of the poison, so he would appear to be the victim of a natural if mysterious ailment.

ROSELLI ARRANGED with a Cuban, related to one of Castro's chefs, to plant the deadly pellets in the dictator's food. On March 13, 1961, Roselli delivered the capsules to his contact at

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Miami Beach's glamorous Fontainebleau Hotel.

A couple weeks later, just about the right time for the plot to have been carried out, a report out of Havana said Castro was ill. But he recovered before the Bay of Pigs invasion on April 17, 1961.

The Cuban who had sneaked the poison into Havana was never seen again. The CIA, unsure whether the plotters had failed or the poison simply hadn't been strong enough, decided to try again with a more powerful dose. Roselli arranged for triple-strength capsules to be slipped into Castro's food several weeks after the Bay of Pigs. But once again, the plot failed and the conspirators disappeared.

Four more attempts were made on Castro's life, using Cuban assassination teams equipped with high-powered rifles, explosives and two-way radios. At intervals in the dark of night, Roselli personaly delivered the teams in twin powerboats to the Cuban shores.

ONCE, A Cuban patrol boat sank Roselli's boat with a lucky shot but the occupants were quickly fished out of the murky water by the other boat. The assassination team never got a shot at Castro, although the last group reached a rooftop within range.

Roselli, Harvey, O'Connell and company had taken precautions, however, to make sure not even the Cuban recruits knew the CIA was behind the plot. Roselli posed as a representative of big oil interests which sought revenge against Castro expropriating their holdings in Cuba. The weapons and other equipment were of foreign make, mostly Belgian, to prevent any link to the U.S.

All the equipment, including the two powerboats, were purchased out of Roselli's own pocket. The CIA paid only the expenses of its two agents Harvey and O'Connell.

The principals in the CIA conspiracy, sworn to deep secrecy, refused to comment on the caper. We got an admission out of Maheu only that he had handled special jobs for the CIA but he refused to discuss them. Roselli responded with a flat "no comment."

MY ASSOCIATE Les Whitten located Harvey, who left the CIA about two years ago, in Indianapolis. Asked about Roselli, Harvey said he had a high regard for him. Whitten then questioned Harvey about Roselli's daring work.

"This is a long story," replied the former CIA man, "I don't think it ought to be printed." Thereafter, he refused to acknowledge even that he had been a CIA operative.

We got an admission from "Big Jim" O'Connell, who is still with the CIA, that he had met Roselli through Maheu. But when we asked about Roselli's CIA mission, O'Connell also clammed up.

Finally we spoke to John McCone, who headed the CIA at the time of the assassination attempts. He acknowledged the idea had been discussed inside the CIA but insisted it had been "rejected immediately." He vigorously denied that the CIA had ever participated in any plot on Castro's life. Asked whether the attempts could have been made without his knowledge, he replied: "It could not have happened."

We have complete confidence, however, in our sources.